College English Teaching Viewed from the Perspective of Intercultural Communication

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Abstract

Foreign language teaching and learning is unlikely to be performed effectively without an appropriate understanding of its specific culture and the loss of intercultural awareness will lead to a negative influence on FLT. This article proposes the importance of cultural input in FLT, analyzes the factors of failure in cultivation of students' capacity of intercultural communication and finally puts forward some methods and strategies to resolve these issues.

Keywords: Intercultural communication, Culture input, College English teaching

Language is the most important communication tool for human beings, and is an important component of culture. The application of a language is influenced by its cultural background to a certain degree. When people communicate with a language, it always involves other cultural factors beyond the language itself, including social system, customs and habits, values, life style and norms of behavior, etc. Hence, the learning of a language can not go without the understanding of its culture, and only when the teacher goes deep into the cultural connotation implied by a language, that is, "the deep structure of culture" (covert culture) (Gu Jiazu, 2000), can he better guide students to generate a desirable communication schema, understand the cultural information contained in the text in the process of learning and ultimately improve their intercultural communication competence.

1. Factors that influence intercultural communication competence

1.1 Differences between Chinese and western culture

Similar to language, culture can not be innately acquired, but has to be learned, but lack of understanding in English culture and cultural differences is the common weakness of Chinese students. Let's have a look at the following conversations between Chinese students and foreign teachers:

Example 1:

Chinese student: Hi, Jack, where are you going?

Foreign teacher (feeling unhappily): I wish he weren't so curious about where I am going.

Example 2:

Chinese student: Let me help you with this bag. You're old. You must be tired.

Foreign teacher: It's OK. I can manage. I'm not that old.

Example 3:

Foreign teacher: Your English is very good!

Chinese student: No, no. my English is very poor.

Foreign teacher (thinking): I am an English teacher. I should be able to make the right judgment.

From these conversations, we can see that although the language employed by the student is absolutely correct, his communication with the foreign teacher is obstructed as a result of his lack of understanding in cultural differences, his mechanical copy of Chinese linguistic habits and inappropriate use of the language. Therefore, language teaching is by no means confined to grammar teaching. Even if the sentence is correct in terms of grammar, it may still cause awkwardness or misunderstanding if one does not understand its cultural connotation and its implied cultural background, and may even lead to difficulties in communication caused by non-linguistic factors. Therefore, in English teaching, a teacher should duly introduce to students the cultural background knowledge and awaken their intercultural awareness. For instance, in China, we call the elderly people "lao"(old), which is an expression of respect, whereas in western cultures, "old" means the last days of one's life.

Thus, “old” is a taboo for western people who do not yield to age. For this reason, in British and American society, “senior citizens” is usually used as euphemism to refer to the elderly.

It is true that people with different cultural backgrounds have coincidence in terms of the world outlook, values, behavior and way of thinking, but it is equally true that they have more differences. For example, the attached English and Chinese cultural meanings are basically the same when referring to the braveness of lion, the docility of sheep, the slyness of fox, the slowness of tortoise and the greediness of swine. However, in understanding the habitual nature of mouse, mule and night owl, the attached English and Chinese cultural meanings are widely divergent. In Chinese, we have such idioms as “look like a mouse and as shortsighted as a mouse”, etc, which are used to describe furtiveness and a narrow vision, whereas in English, the “mouse” can refer to women and bashful people. In Chinese, night owl can be used to stand for portent of bad things to come, whereas in English, the night owl is a bird of intelligence. To realize the similarities and the differences of these aspects is of special importance to language learning. For example, the commercial economy in western society was separated from the patriarchal society of clan family at an earlier stage, and was transformed into an indenture system based society with the basis of property relation, characterized by a respect for personality, independence, equality, competition, freedom , personal privacy, and individualism. Thus, In English, “I” is always capitalized wherever it is placed. Furthermore, the traditional way of thinking in western culture is based on logical analysis and inference, and pursues accurate cognition, whereas Chinese traditional way of thinking is based on intuition and synthesis, focuses on a grasp of targets from an overall perspective, and lays particular stress on comprehensive thinking and thinking in images. All these differences lead to differences in Chinese and English in terms of discourse and text structure. That is, western people are inclined to use of linear thinking when they speak or write, tend to get straight to the point from the very beginning, and then give examples to demonstrate their point. By contrast, Chinese tend to state reasons, conditions and background, and then come to the point. In view of these factors, in English learning, Chinese students should pay attention to the differences of the two cultures as well as the differences in their modes of discourse so as to avoid communication failure.

1.2 Misunderstanding in the connotative meanings of vocabulary

In Chinese and western culture, there are quite a lot of vocabulary with similar conceptual meanings but widely divergent connotative meanings. Such vocabulary is established by usage in the life of people with different cultural background, and has fixed associative meanings which reflect the national character or cultural color. For example, (1) the vocabulary concerning animals. In Chinese culture, "crane" is the symbol of longevity. In traditional Chinese painting, in most cases, "crane" appears simultaneously with the pine, which is termed as "crane and pine for longevity". However, as for British and American people, crane can not arouse similar association, and even if there is any association, it is probably “crane” (a large machine that moves heavy things by lifting them in the air)", although in English, "crane (the machine)" and "crane (a kind of large bird with a long neck and long legs)" are homonym. (2) Vocabulary concerning color. Take the word "blue" as an example. In English, blue is usually connected with the meaning of being sad or depressed, and “blues” is a kind of music that is slow and sad, while "in a blue mood" means "in a sad or depressed mood". In addition, the word "blue" can also enable people to come to associate with aristocracy, because blue-blooded means "be of aristocratic birth". Neither of the connotative meanings of the word "blue" exists in the Chinese expression "blue". Besides, the connotative meaning refers to the meaning beyond the conceptual meaning, and is usually linked with the natural instincts and characteristics of objective things. For instance, idealism has two meanings in English, and one is a philosophical terminology without any commendatory or derogatory meaning, whereas in Chinese, "idealism" has a derogatory sense. The other meaning of idealism in English is “the behavior and beliefs of someone who has ideals”, which has both its positive or negative connotations, whereas in Chinese, "idealism" usually has the meaning of being divorced from reality, with derogatory sense.

In intercultural communication, because the two parties participating in communication are short of understanding in social and cultural tradition of the other party, and people with different cultural background have their particular conversational norms or rules, people tend to employ automatically and unconsciously their own way of speech, which may cause misunderstanding by the other party, and even lead to conflicts. This is termed as pragmatic failure by linguists. It is quite likely that westerners are tolerant of some grammatical mistakes we make in the process of communication, but the outcome of pragmatic failure is more serious. One who speaks fluent English is likely to be mistakenly believed to be familiar with the cultural background and value concept of this language, and his pragmatic failure is sometimes interpreted as an intentional speech act. On the other hand, "if westerners are aware of the secret about the deep structure of national culture hidden behind such a sort of problems, it is believed that they will not be that averse to such questions by Chinese, since

mutual friendly expressions are welcomed at any time" (Gu Jiazu, 2000).

2. The enlightenment of intercultural communication theory to EFL

2.1 To activate cultural schema related with the text

The cultural schema discussed in this article can be understood as cultural knowledge beyond the text, including the knowledge structure constructed by cultural background, local customs and practices and concept of value, etc, and it plays a crucial role in language understanding and text reading. Therefore, teachers should activate students' cultural schema according to the subject matter and content of teaching materials so as to better understand the content of the text and grasp the language skills. Teachers should take the following aspects into consideration.

2.1.1 To activate background knowledge

The present College English teaching materials published in China are mostly original, and they also contain many intercultural elements, which create favorable circumstance for intercultural education. For example, when teaching the text "Longing for a New Welfare System"(Unit 3, Book 4, *New Horizon College English*), if a teachers gives a brief introduction to his students about the background knowledge of social welfare system in U.S.A before the illustration of the text, students may have a better understanding of the text. Similarly, the text "A Brush with the Law"(Unit 1, Book 3,*College English*) describes "I", a member of the Counter-Culture in 1960s who, when waiting for entrance into the university, wandered about and was suspected by police to commit a crime and was under arrest and on trial, but in the end, "I" was set free by the court. As a lead-in technique, teachers can introduce relevant laws in Britain by introducing the Counter-Culture and its characteristics, and help students make clear the cause and effect of a conflict and therefore, students might have a further understanding about the way of thinking and the value orientation of British people.

2.1.2 To explore the connotative meanings of vocabulary

Abundant cultural information is contained in vocabulary. The cultural awareness generated in the process of cultural development may affect the meanings of vocabulary, and endow the vocabulary with different connotative meanings in different languages. Here are some examples. In the text "What is Intelligence, Anyway", the American renowned writer Issac Asimov had a discussion on the relativity of intelligence. He said that when anything went wrong with his car, he always hastened to his car-repairer, watched him anxiously as he explored its vitals, and "listened to his pronouncements as though they were divine oracles". To British and American people, oracles often bring them such association: the oracle of Apollo at Delphi, which refers to the oracle released by Apollo at Delphi in the Greek myths, meaning quite smart and reliable forecast, or obscure and ambiguous inference. In contrast, although the Chinese expression "receiving an imperial edict" also expresses a respectful state of mind, but with less devotion and more reverence and awe.

Besides, there are some figures of speech that make non-native speakers confused, although they reflect the culture of a nation from different perspectives. For example, in the textbook of *College English*, there are expressions such as "have butterflies in one's stomach "the last straw that breaks the camel's back", and other idioms, phrases, and proverbs, which all have their origins. In the process of teaching, teachers should explore the connotative meanings of vocabulary through the explanation of them, so as to enable students to experience the elegance of foreign culture and to strengthen their interest in learning.

2.1.3 To provide students with practical skills

Practical skills, such as the writing skill, are what students need to acquire in their after graduation, and is also what they are relatively lack of. Before the writing practice, teachers may introduce such skills by referring to the language used in the text and the culture reflected in the text, so as to meet students' needs.

For instance, when teaching the text "*My First Job*", teachers may introduce some skills about how to write advertisements, application letters and resumes, etc. Due to the differences in culture, the writing of advertisements and application letters is not simply a matter of word-for-word translation between languages. Practical texts in Chinese and English are distinguished in terms of content and ways of expression. For example, Chinese advertisements are used to narrating the details and heightening the atmosphere, whereas English advertisements tend to go straight to the subject matter in brief language. What is more, "blowing one's own trumpet" is something that should be avoided in Chinese culture, whereas it becomes necessary for English application letters, which is meant to show that one is full of confidence, rich in experience and is a qualified candidate. Apart from the instruction in language points, teachers may demonstrate several example texts and ask students to design corresponding advertisements, application letters and resumes according to different text contents, and create the situation for conversations or interviews. They may also ask students to translate the

authentic advertisements in newspapers from Chinese to English or from English to Chinese, write application letters that conform to the cultural norms of the target language to practice their practical skills and deepen their understanding in foreign culture.

2.1.4 To improve the comprehensive quality of teachers in an all-round way

Teachers play an irreplaceable role in the cultivation of intercultural communication competence. Some scholars once vividly proposed the formula: language + culture + teacher (catalyst) = communication competence of language (organic compound). Just as Chinese saying goes, "An accomplished apprentice owes his accomplishment to his great master". An English teacher should never settle for being familiar with grammar rules and a command of a vast amount of vocabulary. Only if the teacher is equipped with strong intercultural communication competence and solid foundation in Chinese and western culture, can he be a qualified teacher.

2.1.5 To reform teaching methods and cultivate students' communication competence

What students should learn from an English class is not merely language forms, but also vivid language itself as well as the covert culture in the language. In order to meet this requirement, reform and innovation should be carried out in such aspects as the concept of teaching, ways of teaching, etc. Teachers should try every means to set up various atmospheres for language practice such as role play, pair-work, group discussion and seminar, etc, and encourage students to place themselves in such a simulated situation as frequently as they can. In such a way, students may increasingly know the rule about what a person should say under specific circumstance, so that they may make better use of the way of thinking in English and experience the cultural connotation expressed by the target language.

2.1.6 To facilitate teaching by means of CAAL

The development of computer technology opens to us a window to know about the world, and also provides us with more effective teaching methods and means. At present, an overwhelming majority of universities and colleges in China are equipped with multi-media facilities, and the texts, narrations, photos, diagrams, video clips and music provided by the Internet feature figurativeness, diversity, novelty, richness and interest, which can bring students' intercultural awareness and interest in learning in full play. Meanwhile, teachers should encourage students to read more British and American literary works and English newspapers after class, accumulate relevant cultural knowledge, and watch more films in the original, which will surely bring much benefit to students.

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